

XIX.—Letters, Extracts, and Notes.

Modern methods in Nomenclature.

SIR,—Having been a member of the British Ornithologists' Union for fifty years—elected in 1868—I have lived long enough to see many changes in men and manners, and, I regret to say, long enough to see a departure from the methods of studying Ornithology, which I much deplore. For some time past I have felt much dissatisfied with the affairs of the Union, and avail myself of the present opportunity to state my reasons.

(1) I do not like the way in which the Journal is conducted on lines at variance with opinions expressed in 'The Ibis List of Birds,' 1915. That volume of 430 pages cost a great deal of money, and was intended to bring about greater uniformity in nomenclature. In this direction it has not succeeded. Neither the Editor nor the contributors to 'The Ibis' seem to be bound by it, and names recommended for use are disregarded. To give an example. In a review of Dr. Shufeldt's paper "On the Osteology and Systematic Position of the *Pygopodes*" (Ibis, 1904, p. 658), Professor Newton wrote:—

"We agree with Dr. Shufeldt that American Ornithologists have made a great disturbance of nomenclature in transposing the name *Colymbus* from the Divers to the Grebes. Moreover, we consider that the change, like many others proposed, is quite unjustifiable."

In spite of this authoritative opinion, in which I entirely concur, Dr. Hartert and his co-editors, in their 'Hand-list of Birds,' 1912, persist in the transposition of these two generic names.

The Committee of the B. O. U., in the Appendix to the new 'List of British Birds,' 1915, properly pointed out (p. 399) that Latham in 1787 very definitely adopted Linnaeus's genus *Colymbus* for the Divers, and proposed *Podiceps* (rectius *Podicipes*) for the Grebes, and concluded by expressing the hope "that the Check-list Committee of

the American Ornithologists' Union will see their way to return to the older and as they believe to the correct usage of the genus *Colymbus* in the near future."

My point is that, notwithstanding this expression of opinion, the Editor of 'The Ibis' has allowed contributors to adopt the objectionable transposition complained of. Other equally indefensible changes have been attempted in the 'Hand-list of Birds,' notably the transposition of the scientific names of the Song-Thrush and Redwing; but fortunately in this case the Committee of the B. O. U. have very properly condemned it. Would that they had displayed equal courage in resisting other innovations.

(2) I very much object to the constant changes of names that are made on the score of priority, and in defiance of the strongly-worded protest that was made by leading zoologists, on the initiative of Dr. Boulenger, at a meeting of the Zoological Society in 1908. I was not present at that meeting or I should certainly have signed the protest referred to, having been long convinced of the confusion and inconvenience which have been caused by the reckless changes complained of.

(3) I deplore also the amount of time expended, and valuable space wasted in describing so-called "subspecies," based either on individual variation or on the most trivial differences, which are wholly insufficient to entitle them to recognition.

If any particular bird can be shown to be specifically distinct from another to which it is evidently nearly related, by all means give it a specific name with a recognisable description; but if it differs only in such trivial particulars as mere *shade* of colour, slight difference in size, or infinitesimal variation in length of bill or wing, such variations can surely be pointed out in a few words without burdening the list of species with new names. This practice therefore should be discouraged by the Committee, and discontinued in 'The Ibis' at all events. For it is not only of no practical value, but the results are most embarrassing and irritating to readers when descriptions of new subspecies

are unaccompanied (as is generally the case) by any information concerning the haunts, habits, nesting, etc., of the newly-named "forms."

To insist upon the acceptance of such views as I condemn is to knock all the life out of the study of ornithology, and to encourage a younger generation to pay more attention to rule and compass than to the more fascinating and more useful study of the living birds and their geographical distribution.

(4) I object further to the bestowal of new names on old and well-known species on the pretext of their being "British forms" or "Continental forms," regardless of the fact that most of them are regular migrants to and from Europe, and therefore may be one day "British" and the next day "Continental."

(5) I take up a number of 'The Ibis' and find birds that I have known all my life—or, say, for fifty years—referred to by new and strange names, some of which I never heard before, and which are not to be found in the 'Index Generum Avium,' so carefully prepared by Mr. F. H. Waterhouse, e. g. *Ixobrychus* for the Little Bittern. The worst of it is that these new names get adopted by those of a younger generation who think they ought to follow the latest fashion; they appear in print, and before they have been long published some clever grave-digger disinters still older names for which priority is claimed, and the newly-proposed ones have to be relegated to the already overburdened list of synonyms.

(6) But the practice to which I take the greatest exception, on the score of the inconvenience and confusion which it causes, is that of quoting the 10th edition of Linnæus's 'Systema' (1758) instead of the 12th (1766), which was the last revised by him and published in his life-time. This is a direct violation of the Code of Rules for Zoological Nomenclature drawn up by a Select Committee of the British Association in 1842, reprinted in 1863, and again in 1878, and therefore entitled to "priority." This infringement of principle introduced by American ornithologists

should never have been countenanced by the British Ornithologists' Union, still less adopted as it has been. It is incontestable that it has caused the greatest confusion by the alteration of names which have been current in our literature for upwards of a century, and have become as familiar as "household words." It results, moreover, in a manifest injustice to Linnæus himself, who is thereby made responsible not only for typographical errors, but also for names in the tenth edition of his great work which he corrected in the twelfth, the last published in his lifetime. To give but one instance of such injustice. In his tenth edition Linnæus named the Golden Oriole *Coracias oriolus*, but subsequently in the twelfth edition, having discovered his mistake in regard to the genus to which he assigned it, he altered the generic name to *Oriolus*, and bestowed the specific name *galbula*, and as *Oriolus galbula* this name has stood in all the textbooks from that time to the present day. Why then alter it to *Oriolus oriolus* in face of the statement by the Committee of the B. O. U. that "Linnæus almost invariably avoided using the same name in the generic and specific sense." The word "almost" I think might be deleted, for I can recall but one instance in which he involuntarily did so. That was in the case of a fish (the mackerel), which, by a printer's error, was at first named *Scomber scomber*; but as I pointed out twenty odd years ago (*Zoologist*, 1894, p. 471), Linnæus corrected this in his own handwriting to *Scomber scombrus* (a substantive in apposition), thus removing all ground for establishing a precedent. Yet, nowadays the new school of faddists, not content with repeating the generic name for what they call the type-species, must needs repeat it a third time to indicate a "subspecies," and so we are expected to adopt such ridiculous combinations as *Oriolus oriolus oriolus* and *Pica pica pica* (as one might call to a dog), or worse still *Coccothraustes coccothraustes coccothruustes*, well-nigh unpronounceable. All this verbiage should be swept away, and a return made to the simplicity of the binomial system of Linnæus, in accordance with the views of the practical naturalists who

seventy-five years ago established the Rules for Zoological Nomenclature that were subsequently accepted by the founders of 'The Ibis.' The latter never could have foreseen such vagaries as have arisen at the present day. I would go further, and say that, since experience has shown that nothing but confusion has resulted from the use of the 10th edition of Linnæus, we are never likely to attain uniformity in nomenclature until we return to the use of the 12th edition as revised by the author; and the longer we delay the correction of the mistake that has been made, the greater will be the confusion bequeathed to posterity.

Your obedient servant,

Weybridge,

March, 1918.

JAMES EDMUND HARTING.

**Annual General Meeting of the British Ornithologists'
Union.**

The Annual General Meeting of the B. O. U. for 1918 was held on 13 March at the Offices of the Zoological Society of London, Col. R. G. Wardlaw-Ramsay, the President, in the Chair. There were fifty-four Members present.

The Minutes of the last Annual General Meeting were read and confirmed.

The Statement of Accounts for the year 1917, which had been circulated, were submitted and passed.

The Annual Report of the Committee was read as follows:—

“The Committee have much pleasure in being able to report that during the year 1917 the deficit of £40 on the 1st January has been turned into a credit balance of £204 15s. 5d. The accounts for the past year, which have been kindly audited by Mr. H. Munt, show what we trust will be deemed a satisfactory result. The total receipts in 1917 have been £851 15s. 6d. as compared with £941 17s. 1d. in the previous year, the decrease being due to the smaller number of the Jubilee Supplement and the List of British Birds sold. The total payments have been £615 6s. 7d.

as against £938 9s. 4d. in 1916, but we have in the present year £45 2s. 6d. outstanding on account of plates. The decrease in the payments is due chiefly to the fact that we have not had to pay for extra publications, such as the Jubilee Supplement, the List of British Birds, and the General Index (1895–1912), for which we had to pay in 1916.

“The cost of ‘The Ibis’ has been £523 6s. 6d. as against £465 1s. 11d. in the previous year. The present volume, which is the fifty-ninth, and the fifth of the Tenth Series, contains 670 pages, and is illustrated with seven coloured and four uncoloured plates and four text-figures. The reason for the increased cost is due to a rise in cost of printing, binding, reproducing plates, and indeed every item connected with the production of ‘The Ibis.’

“It is satisfactory to note that in spite of present circumstances the sales of ‘The Ibis’ and other publications have been well maintained.

“With regret the Committee report the deaths of the following Members since the last Annual General Meeting:—C. J. Alexander, G. H. Dawson, Prof. Dr. Otto Finsch, Prof. Dr. Emil Goeldi, J. R. Hatfield, Sir H. J. Johnson, Prof. G. Martorelli, Colonel E. S. Mason, A. J. North, F. M. Ogilvie, Godfrey V. Webster.

“The following gentlemen have resigned:—J. P. Chaworth Musters, F. P. Johnson.

“The membership of the Union, and comparison with the previous five years, is as follows:—

	1918.	1917.	1916.	1915.	1914.	1913.
Ordinary Members ...	423	416	420	441	433	425
Extraordinary „ ...	1	1	1	1	1	2
Honorary „ ...	8	9	9	9	7	8
Hon. Lady „ ...	8	9	8	6	6	6
Colonial „ ...	9	10	10	10	9	9
Foreign „ ...	19	19	19	20	19	20

“There are 16 candidates for Ordinary Membership, 1 for Honorary Membership, 1 for Foreign Membership, and 1 for Colonial Membership.”

Prior to the Committee's recommendation in regard to the appointment of a President being read, Dr. Forbes objected to the nomination as invalid owing to Rule 11, which requires six weeks' notice to be given, not having been complied with. The Honorary Secretary having explained the reason for this,

The Chairman moved that Standing Orders be suspended with a view to take the opinion of the meeting as to whether the election of a President should be proceeded with. This was seconded by Colonel Rattray. Dr. H. O. Forbes objected and was supported by Mr. Abel Chapman. The motion was carried by twenty-nine to six, many Members not voting.

The Committee's recommendation "that Dr. W. Eagle Clarke, LL.D., F.L.S., F.R.S.E., be elected President in the place of Colonel R. Wardlaw-Ramsay, who retires on the expiry of the fifth year of his Presidentship," was then read. Colonel Fielden, who had proposed Mr. H. M. Upcher for President, then proceeded to read a letter from that gentleman in which he stated that under no circumstances would he allow his name to be put forward in a contested election. Colonel Fielden therefore withdrew his nomination. Mr. Trevor-Battye spoke to the same effect. The recommendation of the Committee was then put to the meeting and carried by forty-nine votes to one.

Mr. G. M. Mathews was elected a Member of the Committee, in place of Mr. D. Seth-Smith who retires by seniority.

Messrs. H. M. Wallis and C. E. Pearson were appointed Scrutineers to superintend the Ballot.

The following sixteen candidates for Ordinary Membership were then balloted for and elected:—Arthur Astley, Captain Arthur William Boyd, M.C., Patrick Arthur Chubb, Frederick Grant, Edward Grevile Herbert, R.F.C., Charles Malcolm Inglis, Harry Raymond Munt, William Rowan, Major A. G. L. Sladen, R.E., Major C. W. Smeed, R.F.A., Thomas Smith, Arthur Lloyd Sturge, G. de Horne Vaizey,

K. G. R. Vaizey, A. H. Walker, M.D. L.R.C.P., M.R.C.S.,
Captain J. A. C. Whitaker.

Mr. Harry Church Oberholser, a Foreign Member, was elected an Honorary Member; Captain S. A. White, an Ordinary Member, was elected a Colonial Member; and Mr. Nagmachi Kuroda was elected a Foreign Member of the Union.

The President announced that the Committee recommended that the names of all members of enemy nationality should be removed from the published lists of the Union for the duration of the war. After some discussion the resolution was passed in an amended form as proposed by Mr. R. W. Chase and seconded by Mr. H. B. Booth as follows:—"That the names of all Honorary, Ordinary, and other Members of enemy nationality be omitted from the published lists of the Union and that they be removed from the Society, provided that if re-elected at the expiration of the war, they be not called upon to pay an entrance fee."

Copies of some correspondence which had taken place between Dr. H. O. Forbes and certain Members of the Committee were laid on the table for the perusal of the Members. Arising out of this, Dr. Forbes asked for a Select Committee to be appointed to consider this correspondence, to which the Committee had taken great exception on account of the intemperate language used by Dr. Forbes.

The Chairman explained the attitude of the Committee and suggested as alternative action to be taken, (1) The appointment of a Select Committee, or (2) The calling of a Special General Meeting at some future date to consider the matter.

Colonel Rattray and some others having pointed out the great inconvenience that would be caused to Members by calling another General Meeting, and having expressed a strong wish that the matter should be finally settled forthwith, moved a proposal to that effect, which was seconded by Mr. Bunyard. This was almost unanimously approved.

Dr. Forbes then spoke in defence of his conduct, having accepted the decision of the Meeting to hear and adjudicate on his case. He was prepared to withdraw only one of the expressions to which exception had been taken. The Chairman then said that the Committee considered that the whole tone of Dr. Forbes's letters was grossly insulting and that no self-respecting Committee could possibly rest satisfied with the partial apology offered by Dr. Forbes.

Mr. D. A. Bannerman then moved and Mr. C. B. Rickett seconded the following motion :—

“That after consideration of the correspondence between Dr. H. O. Forbes and certain Members of the Committee, this Meeting is of opinion that the conduct of Dr. Forbes has been most improper and unworthy of a Member of the Union, and calls upon him to offer an ample apology and to withdraw his letters or to resign his Membership of the British Ornithologists' Union.”

No Amendment being proposed, this Motion was put to the Meeting and carried, with three dissentients only.

With regard to two further motions of Dr. Forbes, having for their object changes in Rule VII. and Rule XIV. of the Union, the first was negatived and the second withdrawn.

Mr. D. Seth-Smith proposed and Mr. Chase seconded a vote of thanks to the Auditor, Mr. H. Munt. This was duly carried.

Mr. Selater proposed a vote of thanks to the Zoological Society for the use of their offices and rooms during the past year. This was carried unanimously.

Mr. Gladstone proposed and Mr. Elwes seconded a vote of thanks to the Chairman, which was carried.

Erratum.

In Mr. T. Carter's paper, 'Ibis,' 1917, pp. 564 611 :—

p. 573, first line, *for* 1877 *read* 1887.

The telegraph-line was not opened until 1885.